WATER IS EVERYWHERE, WATER IS EVERYTHING

Myths, Legends and Stories from the Indigenous Peoples of the Rupununi Region
Key contributions

*Water is Everywhere, Water is Everything*

**Introduction**

*Warakiinaru & the Sacred Pool*
A traditional story from the Wapichan community, as told by Ian Paul

*A Water-pool Spirit Keeper*
A traditional story from the Wapichan community, as told by Ian Paul

Edited by Kid James, Immaculata Casimero, Paulinus Albert

*Connected ponds of the North Rupununi*
A traditional story from the Makushi community, as told by Michael Williams

*Surama Lake*
A traditional story from the Makushi community, as told by Paulette Allicock

*The Sacred Pool and Waterfall at Fish River*
A traditional story from the Wapichan Community, as told by Ian Paul

Edited by Kid James and Immaculata Casimero

**Special thanks to**

South Rupununi District Council (SRDC)
South Central People's Development Association (SCPDA)
North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDB)

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This story collection is curated by **WWF – Guianas** under the *Shared Resources, Joint Solutions* Programme

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FOREWORD

Indigenous Peoples of Guyana and the world overall, share an integral relationship, intrinsic value and understanding of our natural world. This deep connection has been embodied in their cultures, beliefs, decision making processes and actions for centuries. Over the years, these beliefs have also enriched and effect conservation of the natural environment.

In recent years, however, many Indigenous Peoples have experienced limited transfer and the die-way of these beliefs. Indigenous Peoples have been attempting to ensure the transfer of these beliefs or, at minimum, the stories, from generation to generation.

This publication therefore seeks to contribute to capturing and recording some of these beliefs, especially those that are related to water resources. We believe that the participation of indigenous peoples is paramount to the preservation of nature and is critical to the success of the work of WWF as we seek to secure the planet's future for People and Nature.

Aiesha Williams.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Booklet is made possible with support from the South Rupununi District Council (SRDC)/South Central Peoples Development Association (SCPDA) and the North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDDB).

The Booklet would not have been possible without the efforts and determination of Kid James, Immaculata Casimero and Faye Fredericks who facilitated the process from the South Rupununi and Ivor Marslow and Michael Williams from the North Rupununi.

Special thanks to the story tellers and translators – Ian Paul; Paulette Allicock and Michael Williams who took the time to share their stories with the wider public; Kemptorne Daly and Vitus Antone for facilitating the collection and translation processes.

Finally, thanks to Francesca Masoero for supporting the process and adding life to the stories.
Indigenous Peoples of the Rupununi have a deep connection with their natural environment, in particular for food and livelihood. This connection is evident in the various traditions of the people, especially stories – myths and beliefs that embodies different cultural practices.

The *Water is Everything, Water is Everywhere* booklet captures selected traditional stories form the Wapichan and Makushi Peoples. The elders from the communities—keepers of wisdom—relay these stories to the younger generation (youths) not only to transfer critical traditional practices but to help them understand the connection and importance of living in harmony with their environment.

The general belief is that everything is sacred and has a spirit protector. Permission must be obtained to harvest, hunt, fish or conduct any activity and only what is needed must be taken, otherwise the harmony or balance is affected. The resultant effect of taking more than needed is the spirit becoming angry and affecting the hunters in some way.
The stories shared as part of this collection transmit the message that the environment must be cared for and respected. Damages to the environment in one way can be manifested in another on the people.

Only the elders in the community know the type of being (spirit) occupying each area and the type of ceremony or ritual needed to communicate with the spirit. Only the Marunao or Pijai man (Shaman) in the community knows how to perform the ritual to appease the spirit. Sometimes they use wood or leaves, to call its attention. The ritual would sometimes be performed to ask the spirit for mercy. But most rituals were performed to ask permission to access an area or to hunt, fish or gather. No one could go hunting or fishing without having performed the ritual first.

Communities today, especially the Wapichan and Makushi, are recognising and documenting their traditional practices, including stories to ensure the information could be shared with the younger generations. By maintaining the connection with their environment, they are also ensuring the spirits are still with them.
WARAKIINARU & THE SACRED POOL

A traditional story from the Wapichan community, as told by Ian Paul

This is a true story that took place ten miles away from Aishalton village. Upstream from the great Chida Wa'o Falls is a small creek lined with ìte palm trees on either side of the banks. This creek is known as Irish Mada Wa'o. At its mouth, there is a small waterfall about eight feet high, which falls into a pool of beautiful greenish water. That place is known as a sacred site.

One day a mother and her son, Warakiinaru, went fishing at that pool, not knowing it was a sacred pool. That day, they were happy that the fish were biting so much. One would not have imagined that something very strange would happen.

Warakiinaru's mother left him for a short while. When she returned, her son was no longer there! The spirit keepers of the pool had taken him into the pool to live with them. His mother did not know what had happened, so she returned home without her son. When her husband saw her returning alone, he asked her about Warakiinaru. She told him that she suspected that their son had disappeared into the pool at the Irish Mada Wa'o Waterfall, because his fishing rod was still there.

Her husband became very worried about their only son. The next day, Warakiinaru's father went to the pool and started looking for his son. He called out his name several times. Suddenly, before his eyes, Warakiinaru appeared. As he surfaced, there was a rumbling sound like thunder from beneath the water.
Warakiinaru's father was so surprised and wanted to know where he had been because Warakiinaru had said, "I have found a better place than around here." So, his father questioned him, "Is the place very beautiful there? What things did you see there? Why do you want to stay there?" Warakiinaru replied that the place was just perfect. It was beautiful and comfortable and had everything one could ever want to see.

Upon learning about this wonderful place, his father asked him to bring him a bowl of sawarao to drink. Warakiinaru dove into the water and immediately came up with a tasty bowl of sawarao. His father was very happy to taste the sawarao and asked his son to get him another bowl. Warakiinaru dove into the water again to get his father a second bowl of sawarao. His father finished the second bowl of sawarao in no time. That was when Warakiinaru warned his father in a sad voice, "Beware, this is the last bowl I can get for you. If you ask for another one, I won't be able to come back." But his father was still not satisfied and paid no attention to his son's warning. So, when he finished his second bowl of sawarao, he asked for a third one.

When Warakiinaru dove into the water for the third time, there was a thunder-like rumbling sound from beneath the pool. Warakiinaru disappeared into the water, never to be seen again.

Because of Warakiinaru's disappearance, the people living around Katonan Naawa (the Katonan Hill) became more aware of that sacred pool. This caused those who lived in the area called Katonan Wanom Naawa (Clustered Bush Island Hill) to move to Chowirikada Naawa (Hassar Hill) and Tamaruo Wa' o (Bat Creek).

To this day, their descendants continue to live there.
A WATER-POOL SPIRIT KEEPER

A traditional story from the Wapichan community, as told by Ian Paul and edited by Kid James, Immaculata Casimero, Paulinus Albert.

Ten miles from the village of Achawib, there lived a great spirit who was the protector of a very special pool and the Tam Toon Mountain. Kodoi Din, the spirit keeper cannot be seen, but his presence can be felt by a strong cold breeze … “Whoosh!”

This is a true story of coming in contact with Kodoi Din— the spirit keeper of a freshwater pool.

A long time ago, a young Atorada girl named Tasho and her sister accompanied their parents on a fishing trip to Tam Toon baoko. Along with them were their three cousins and two other men named Boshkaa and Masowiiki.

That bright and sunny day, on their way to the pool, they saw a huge and juicy tortoise that they could have for lunch. “We should catch this tortoise, crack the shell open and eat the meat,” her father said to his family. They were all in agreement.

They decided to rest next to a freshwater pool at the foot of the Tam Toon Mountain. The pool was sacred and should not be disturbed in any way, even for bathing. This pool was called Tam Toon Baoko. It was said to shine when the sun hits directly, making the murky water almost clear enough to see the fishes swimming beneath the surface.
Upon arrival at the pool, they saw three young children sitting idly by themselves. The family was very happy to have extra company to share their meal.

The children helped to prepare the tortoise to cook. Moments later a small fire was lit, and the pot began to boil. Soon the pot was bubbling, and the broth began to drip into the fire. A wonderful aroma filled the air. The children had also started to roast the tortoise's shell. They had no idea that the smell of their food would anger the Spirit and prevent it from protecting the pool and the mountain from harm.

Instantly, huge dark clouds started forming from the east, blocking out the sun and making the entire area around the pool dark. A cold breeze started to blow, gradually transforming into a strong force that scattered the fire coal and caused the hammocks and branches of the trees to sway.

Then, a thunderstorm started, drenching everyone because of no proper shelter. Everything happened like clockwork: first dark clouds appeared, blocking out the sun like an eclipse, then a strong breeze started to blow so hard that it churned the water causing it to scream. This was followed by lightning and ear-splitting thunder. All of these phenomena demonstrated Kodoi Din's anger.

Tasho and her sister held on tightly to their mother.

Just moments earlier, the family had planned to rest by the pool but now because of the thunderstorm, they were unsure of their next step.

Fortunately, the young girl's mother knew what she had to do to appease the spirit keeper.
Suddenly, they felt the earth beneath them begin to shake, the wind got stronger and began ripping at their clothes, the rain was pouring harder... then they all heard the spirit slowly approaching with a rumbling sound.

No one knew from where he was approaching. No one knew what he looked like. What they did know was that he was there, somewhere in their presence, and very angry for being disturbed.

Those who know of Kodoi Din say that Kodoi Din is a huge black animal with the body of a jaguar, a tapir's head, and paws the size of the biggest platter. That is why it is also known as “platter paws”.

The mother quickly started a simple ritual to save her family. She picked up a piece of burnt firewood, prayed over it and threw it in the pool. A burst of orange red sparks shot forward briefly before being swallowed by the pool. She repeated this process three times.

After just five minutes, everything returned to normal. No more rain! No more dark clouds! No more wind! No more thunder! No more Kodoi Din! Everything vanished just as quickly as it had appeared.

Kodoi Din had been appeased and the family had learnt that certain actions and activities should not be done around sacred areas in order to maintain the balance with nature.
CONNECTED PONDS OF THE NORTH RUPUNUNI

A traditional story from the Makushi community as told by Michael Williams

In the North Rupununi, exists a long underground tunnel that connects several ponds. The tunnel starts from the river head in Wagang and winds its way down to Pine Pond. It then streams across to Devil Pond and goes onwards to Kwatamang Pond.

Fishes and other animals move freely across each pond through the tunnel. But the pond also serves as a passageway for other, ominous, things. Spirits use the tunnel as a passageway to move from one pond to the next.

One of those spirits, Opaímî, looks like a small octopus. Opaímî can become very big and angry if anyone from the nearby villages does not follow the rules on how to use the ponds. For instance, if you cross the river at midnight without asking, the spirit will sink your boat, by cutting it in half.

Devil Pond is one of the only ponds in the North Rupununi that has dark brown almost black water. The other ponds all have clear water.
Long ago, before the pond fully appeared, the land was savannah-like in nature with only grass. But beneath the grass was water, so whenever people visited, they disappeared under water, never to be seen again. Because of this, no one visited Devil Pond. Pine Pond locally called Patúkupî, has this name because it used to be surrounded by pines. Long ago, people from the surrounding villages had to seek permission from the great spirits to visit the pond.

The Pijai (Shaman) would travel the night before to the pond to ask permission for the community to visit the pond the next day. The Pijai would say - “Tomorrow we are coming with our children to the pond to fish for our community. We will not disturb you!”. The Pijai would again return to the pond early in the morning, before everyone else, and shout to the spirit - “We have arrived! I spoke to you last night. We plan to visit the pond today: we have just come out to fish for our livelihoods.”

After that, people from the community could carry out their activities. Because these ponds are guarded by spirits, rules are strict and must be followed otherwise bad luck will follow. When fishing, for instance, people could not disturb or identify the wildlife by name. Similarly, bows used by hunters and fishermen could not touch the water. As soon as any wrong is committed, dark clouds appear, followed by thunder and lightning. Black caimans would also suddenly appear in the water. At the same time, spirits would close the doors of the tunnel and all the fishes would disappear, marking the end of any fishing expedition.

One day a fisherman from the nearby village was near Pine Pond and saw a big juicy river turtle. He immediately shot it twice with his arrow, without thinking. But then a strange thing happened: he saw his arrows and the turtle disappear.
Within a flash, the weather changed – it became windy and dark clouds appeared from the east. A low rumbling could be heard in the distance and ripples began to appear on the surface of the pool. Fearing the wrath of Opaímì, the fisherman quickly left the pond, realising the Pijai had not asked permission to the spirits for him to fish in Pine Pond.

Two days later, another fisherman was fishing at Devil Pond and saw a turtle floating in the water with an arrow on the shell. He captured the turtle and took the arrow, feeling very lucky. But then, later that day, he met with the first fisherman, who recognized his arrow and told him he had shot turtle two days before at Pine Pond, but the turtle had disappeared. The turtle travelled through the tunnel from Pine Pond to Devil Pond.

This story supports the belief that people could not go into the water after midnight; and that fishing in Pine Pond and access to Devil Pond were forbidden, unless the Pijai asked the permission of the spirits to enter those ponds and rivers. Up until today, there is still a strong belief that—if anyone goes the ponds without following the rules—spirits will show-up in the form of wind, shower of rain, mist or even take an animal-like form, such as that of a small octopus.

This is how the leaders of the communities taught it is important to always respect the spirit of the ponds. That has also helped people to conserve and protect their natural resources.
There is a story that has been told among the Makushi people for generations now. Many think this story is simply about a village lake, but that isn’t entirely so. It is about the origin of the name of a lake in the North Rupununi and how the original name of this place, Shurama, came into existence. It is tied to a huge rock in the middle of the lake, to a spoiled barbeque and to the story of two quarrelsome brothers who played tricks on each other. This is how the story goes...

There were two brothers, once worshipped by the Makushi people as gods due to their immense powers. The older brother, Inshikira, was the good brother and he was very generous towards his worshippers.

On the other hand, the younger brother Aniki was very naughty and he was known for turning positive situations into bad ones. The two brothers’ personalities were very different and because of this, they often argued.

Many moons ago, these two god-like brothers Inshikira and Aniki were crossing the Brazil border to enter Guyana along with their travel companions. As usual, they argued because Aniki insisted on playing tricks and Inshikira had to fix them.
One day, the brothers arrived in the area now called Surama, in the North Rupununi and decided to stop and rest. There, they found two lakes which they thought were filled with fish. The older brother went to the big lake while the younger brother went to the small lake. Once they arrived at the lakes, along with their companions they prepared a small barbecue space where they would cook, eat, and rest. When they started to fish, each brother realised they had a different sort of luck. Inshikira was catching larger fishes that were more bountiful than Aniki’s meagre amount. When Aniki saw that, he got jealous and decided to punish his older brother by playing a mean trick on him.

When all the fish was caught and cleaned and it was time to have a roast, the brothers went in search of two ure stones. These stones—which were round and smooth and had small iron pieces inside—were used by indigenous peoples to light fires and make barbecue pits.

But Inshikira could not find any good stones to use. Aniki heard him complaining and it was then that he played his trick. Aniki used his powers to turn the last available ure into a stone in the middle of the bigger lake. This lake was a wide expanse of water, so deep that it was said large anacondas were swimming beneath, so the fish swam above to avoid being caught. However, Inshikira’s stone was so large that it was impossible for him to move it, even with his powers. Inshikira searched and searched but could not find another suitable stone.

Since he had no ure to start his fire, he borrowed some from his younger brother as he needed to feed his companions. And so...Aniki decided to play another trick on Inshikia... He made Inshikira’s fire grow so high that all the food burnt to ashes and Inshikia and his companions were left with nothing to eat.

It was such a pity! Everyone was sad. They were all saying “Shurama Ta” which in Makushi means “the barbecue got spoiled”.

A long time ago, in the community of Taotaowan, there lived a man and his wife who had five sons. Their names were Giant Otter, Small Otter, King Fisher, Blue Heron and Brown Heron. They were all skillful fishermen.

Over time as the population in the community began to increase, the fish population decreased. Fishing on a daily basis had led to a scarcity of fish in the nearby creeks. So, Giant Otter planned a fishing trip to go as far as the Kowitaro River.

He journeyed a long way and eventually discovered the Fish River where he caught a lot of Himara from the river. Because he had a long way to go, he decided to roast the fish he caught to preserve them and to make his load lighter when he returned to his family. His family was amazed by all the fish he had brought home, particularly by the supply of roasted Himara. His brothers were very eager to visit Fish River. "Let us all go to that river to catch Himara," they said.

They all agreed enthusiastically, and it was decided that they would start travelling to Fish River the next day. Early the next morning, they said their goodbyes to their parents and started on their way to Fish River.

After a long walk through the savannah and forest, they arrived in the evening. They took a well-deserved rest for one night. The next morning, they began working on their fish trap.
Giant Otter and his brothers started to create a barrier across the river with boulders and palm leaves to block the flow of water causing it to rise.

While they were hard at work making the fish trap two unfamiliar men approached and greeted them cheerfully, "Hello there! What are you doing? And who are you?" The five brothers looked up at the same time, then gave their names and happily responded that they were making a “stop-off” (fish trap) to catch Himara. They explained that they were fishermen and had traveled a long way from Taotaowan to catch fish for their family. The two strangers also explained that they were brothers with very different personalities. Dowidi was the wicked one, and Tominkaru the kind one.

Dowidi, the wicked brother, wanted to interfere with the five brothers' work, so that they would be unable to take home food for their family. So he said to them, “You will not complete this work you have started. Instead you will catch fish for the rest of your life. This stop-off (fish trap) you have built will remain here forever for future generations to see, but you would not be able to use it.”

Dowidi then uttered a bad prayer towards the men and instantly all five brothers were transformed into the animal they were named after: the Giant Otter, the Small Otter, the King Fisher, the Blue Heron and the Brown Heron.
This all happened so suddenly, that Tominkaru could not stop Dowidi in time to help the five brothers. Dowidi and Tominkaru then walked away, leaving the brothers to their fate.

Today if anyone visits Fish River, they will see that it opens into a deep pool and then notice the “stop off” (fish trap) where the water flows over, like in a waterfall. This waterfall was the fish trap (stop off) originally created by the five brothers, which Dowidi turned into a permanent feature of the waterway. Ever since the five brothers were transformed, the waterfall and deep pool at Fish River have become a sacred place for the community.

The pool is vibrant with wildlife and contains a lot of fish. Otters, Blue and Brown Herons and King Fishers can all be found in Fish River, thriving in this area. Therefore, certain activities such as washing pots and plates that contained food with salt and pepper are strictly forbidden since they would contaminate the water, thereby disturbing the harmony in the environment and the water spirits that live there.
For more information
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